

**Senate Select Committee on School Safety Hearing on
“Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity Discrimination and School Safety”**

Plummer Park- Fiesta Hall, West Hollywood

October 3, 2002

**Testimony of Pam Chamberlain,
Senior Trainer, Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students at the Massachusetts
Department of Education**

Good afternoon. I am Pam Chamberlain, Senior Trainer with the Massachusetts Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students, and it is my privilege to address you today about the challenges and accomplishments we have experienced in Massachusetts as we work to create safe schools for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students.

After nine years of state funding to implement the Massachusetts Student Anti-discrimination Law, we can say with confidence that our programs make a difference in the climate of our schools and in the lives of lesbian and gay students. Fewer students report violent incidents directed against them, and more students and faculty say their schools are safer. Hundreds of gay straight alliances are prospering, harassment policies across the state have been amended to include sexual orientation, and thousands of teachers know how to intervene when they hear homophobic name-calling in their classrooms or hallways. How does this happen and what can California learn from its sister state on the East Coast?

I will describe six core components that together make our program what it is. They are: Visibility, Shared Expertise, Skills Building, a State Budget line item, Institutionalization, and Evaluation. Let me explain these one by one.

First is **Visibility**. From the beginning, we have made sure that the words “gay and lesbian” appear prominently alongside “Massachusetts Department of Education” on all our literature. Our Commissioner of Education spoke publicly – and repeatedly – about the program. It was important that the Commissioner was saying the words “gay” and “lesbian” and that the name of the program included these words as well. Our trainings and public events, like the annual Youth Pride March and celebration, are perceived as being more legitimate, and are therefore more accessible, because they are associated with the Department of Education. We hear over and over from teachers and other local organizers that sponsorship by the Department of Education is a key factor in opening the door for schools to address sexual orientation.

Many people had a hand in the formation and nurturance of the Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students, and that leads me to the second success factor, **Shared Expertise**. Much of this work is about relationship development and coalition building, and we work side by side with our colleagues in state agencies, especially the Department of Public Health and with community groups such as GLSEN and PFLAG. Allies from other parts of state government and from lesbian and gay community groups, political organizations and youth-serving agencies identify proudly with the program, to the extent that a certain amount of competition has developed over who is responsible for its success. Truthfully, it has been a jointly owned effort, but not without hard work.

This coalition building is not always comfortable or easy, but it has been absolutely central to the success of our program. This requires respecting local control and community involvement, despite the sometimes slow pace of progress. We also know the value of including youth voices in our decision-making and program delivery, and we can say for certain that our activities are more effective, powerful tools for change because youth speakers are involved. But any student-centered program needs to realize its responsibility to ensure youth speakers are prepared emotionally and are supported responsibly in the important public educational work they provide.

A third success factor is a focus on **Skills Building**. Our goals include behavior change, so all our training events, whether they be with young people or adults, involve a skills building component. In our teacher trainings, we teach how to intervene in anti-gay name calling, and we practice it in concrete ways. Our student training events are not typically one-shot, large scale assemblies. Instead, we model classroom-sized sessions that help students talk comfortably about homosexuality and that give students skills to challenge homophobia in their schools. Our goal is that schools will run their own classroom activities based on this model.

Of course all this has been facilitated by the Massachusetts State Legislature which for eight years has provided **State Funding** for the Safe Schools Program activities at the Departments of Education and Public Health. I'd like to say that our elected representatives know intrinsically that such funding is a good idea, but I must acknowledge the achievements of many advocates who lobbied for discrete, line item funding. Why is this so important? One reason is that it establishes the program as a justifiable, ongoing part of state government, and through its grants and contracts connects the goals of the Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students to many local and regional efforts, such as gay straight alliances, violence prevention efforts, community-based support groups for gay and lesbian youth, and parent and community educational efforts.

Our fifth component of success is a lesson we have learned too painfully. For eight years we have provided leadership for **Institutionalizing** the Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students by advocating for full-time program staff at the Department of Education. I cannot stress enough the importance of these positions that are dedicated to the day-to-day running of the program. The Safe Schools staff manage contracts, oversee grants programs, design and deliver thousands of hours of training in regional settings to gay straight alliance members and their advisors, collaborate with other agencies, educate the Department of Education staff and elected officials and advocated for the program. Beyond all this, however, they have succeeded in institutionalizing the program – at the Department of Education and in school districts -, extolling its importance and effectiveness and helping major decision-makers to support the program's goals. Unfortunately in a time of major budget cuts this past summer, our Governor vetoed the Department of Education line item for our program in our state's 2003 budget and in one afternoon eradicated the \$800,000 funding for the program – which included the funding for the staff positions. Although suicide and violence prevention programs for LGBT youth remain in place at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health remain in place, we are unclear how the Safe Schools for Program for Gay and Lesbian Students will survive without this critical

infrastructure and leadership at the state level. We hope it will be only a temporary setback. Eternal vigilance is the price of institutionalization, I suppose, and I encourage you to consider ways to establish and sustain such leadership positions here in California.

I can bring you some good news about our accomplishments. We have taken seriously the insistent advice from many quarters about the importance of data collection and our sixth component, **Evaluation**. To the Centers for Disease Control's Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey we added questions about sexual orientation and sexual behavior, and now we can analyze the risk for gay, lesbian and bisexual students on a variety of behaviors as well as noting if those risk behaviors decrease in schools where Safe Schools activities are implemented. I am proud to report that they do! We devote resources to a formal evaluation of our own program and encourage and support evaluation activities of others. This has given us data to demonstrate that in those schools where policies prohibit anti-gay harassment, where teacher trainings occur, and where gay straight alliances exist, violence directed at gay and lesbian students decreases. In fact, statewide, there has been an overall decrease in suicide attempts by gay or lesbian students since the program began.

In conclusion, let me say that we are proud of the achievements of so many individuals and groups who have contributed to the Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students. Just last week I attended a totally-student-run rally on the steps of the State House where student speakers eloquently argued for the program's reinstatement before hundreds of their peers. Listening to their speeches and chants, I realized that we have come a long way in Massachusetts since the student anti-discrimination law was amended in 1993, and with or without state funding, we are not going away. I look forward to hearing about California's continued successes in this vital area.